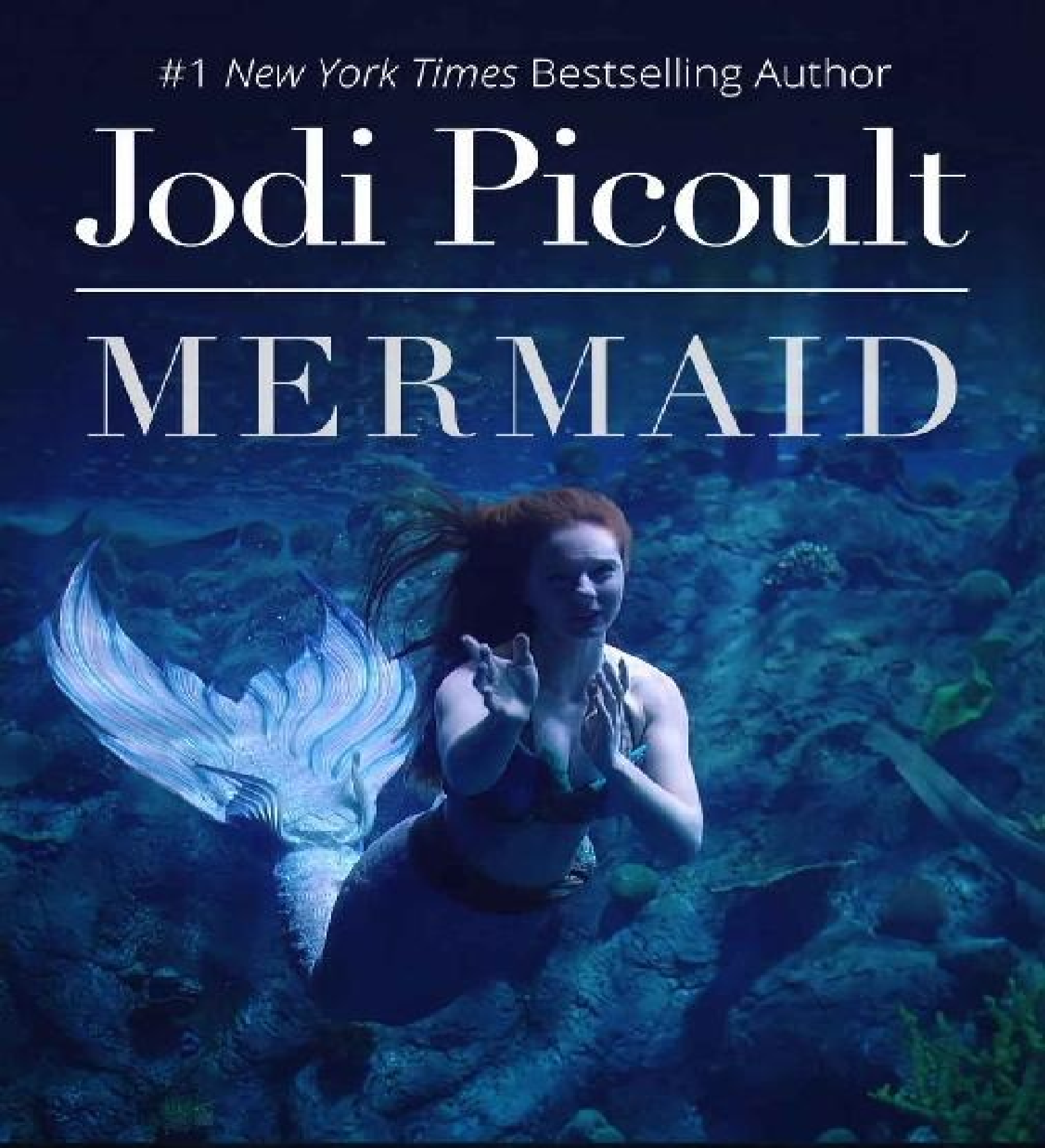
#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

Jodi Picoult

MERMAID



A Kindle Single

Table of Contents

START READING
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
ALSO BY JODI PICOULT
CAST AND CREW

Two Ways to Read

This book features art and animation specifically designed to enhance this story. You can control your experience on compatible devices by using the **Show Media** option in the **Aa** menu.

Jodi Picoult

MERMAID

A Kindle Single

When my mother was pregnant with me, she used to float belly-up in the Gulf of Mexico, with her ears below the surface of the water, and wait for the waves to tell her my name. She told me she'd stare at the seagulls as they circled overhead, forming potential letters that never strung themselves into anything meaningful. For nine months she swam, and for nine months she heard and saw no signs. Still, she decided to name me Hope. Just because the ocean never chose to speak to her didn't mean it wouldn't choose to speak to me.

She wanted me to become a marine biologist; me, I wanted to be a painter. I imagined sitting on a stool somewhere in Tuscany, framing a golden landscape; I wanted to be able to talk at cocktail parties about different types of light. But to make my mother happy, I took a marine biology course. I was hooked the moment the grad student injected phosphorus into shrimp and they glowed beneath the water like a string of Christmas lights. That grad student was Nick. He knew far more about marine biology than I ever would. What he didn't know is that he'd fall in love with me.

Now, years later, I sit in the backyard waiting for the fish to come. Nick is doing a breeding experiment with *Bothus lunatus*—

peacock flounder—and he's organized the project so that it can be done in the comfort of our home—the one we've only just signed the papers for. We bought this house—our first house!—because of the gunite pool, which was empty but full of potential. Not even the listing agent could explain why, in the heat of summer, the pool had been drained. It was a hazard for little kids, an eyesore, an unhealed wound in the backyard.

For us, it was perfect.

I have spent weeks preparing it, lining the bottom with sand and rock to accommodate the habitat of the West Atlantic Ocean. I have tested for acidity and salt. Nick will be studying the serial spawning of this species, and how the flounder might be triggered by warming and cooling currents in the water. He has been planning this since the first night he took me out to dinner. Over steak (he didn't eat fish, out of solidarity), he drew a map of his life that was as clear as any picture I could have painted. The ocean might not have called my name, but Nick had, and it was easy to confuse the two.

I graduated and became an aquarist in Boston, which was the best I could do with an undergraduate degree in marine biology, while Nick slogged through his dissertation. When he took a job as a marine biologist at the same aquarium where I worked, I thought it would be convenient. We could carpool. We could steal kisses in dark corners.

Then life got in the way.

And now, he's heading up a study and I'm trying not to believe that he hired me to assist out of pity or nepotism, rather than credentials.

I hear the rumble of a truck in the driveway. The man who peeks his head over the fence looks like someone I saw last night on the Lifetime Movie Network who killed an entire sorority with a Swiss Army knife, so I speak cautiously through the wooden slats before unlocking the gate. "Yes?" I say, playing dumb.

"Mrs. Payne," he answers. "We have your fish."

I unlock the gate. The blue truck in the driveway says On the Spot Transport. The man's faded plastic name tag reads Johnny.

"You've got to be kidding," I say.

There was a time when I would have called Nick to tell him this, and we would have laughed until our bellies hurt.

Johnny and another man, Felix, cart a couple of large plastic tubs into the backyard. They make damp tracks on the lawn. At my direction, they release the fish into the swimming pool. I tip them, and they leave.

The flounder swim in circles, hovering near the man-made reef Nick and I installed last month. Nick will come home, and we will watch the sun go down over our ingenious suburban breeding tank. We'll drink margaritas and sit so close our shoulders touch. The moon will leap on the water, casting green shadows in his

eyes.

I call Nick at the aquarium to tell him the flounder are here, but he doesn't pick up.

I crouch down and stretch my hand over the shimmering mirror of the pool. The fish settle uneasily at the bottom and stare up at me, both eyes on one side of their heads. This is one of the interesting physiological facts about flounder: from certain angles, they can never tell what's coming.

Here is how peacock flounder reproduce: In a harem. One male, many ladies. It happens just before the sun goes down. A male and a female sidle closer. They bow their backs, and their snouts brush. Then the female plays hard to get, moving away, and the male has to come toward her again, from the other side.

You know, so she's blindsided.

The way flounder mate is spectacular, magical. The male and female are drawn upward together, in a column of water, as if the very act of procreation makes them lighter. When they are floating about six feet above the ocean floor, the fish release their sperm and eggs, a tornado of genetic material. When the pair settle down on the sand again, the male checks to make sure that the mating worked, and they go off in opposite directions.

It was less profound for Nick and me. A snowstorm. Vodka shots. A broken condom.

For twenty minutes, I have counted and recounted. I have checked in corners; I even hiked up my pants and waded into the water myself to make sure there were no blind spots eluding me, no fish hiding beneath the reef. I close my eyes, open them, and count again.

"There are supposed to be fourteen," Nick says, running his hand through his hair, the motion that's giving him a receding hairline.

"There were. I swear it."

"And what happened?" Nick asks. "Did one get up and go out for a jog? For God's sake, how could you lose a fish, Hope?" Almost immediately, his words lose their edge. "I'm sorry," he says. "I shouldn't be yelling at you." His hand, solid and warm, slips down the length of my arm. "It's okay. You signed for the fish, you counted them. The missing one's here, somewhere. Things don't just disappear."

This is not true. This is not true at all.

"You don't have to do this," he tells me. "Maybe it's too soon."

I stare down at our fingers, twisted into a Gordian knot. "This is important to you," I reply. "So it's important to me."

He looks at me as if he is about to say something, but then shakes his head.

"What?"

"Nothing. I just . . . There was a point when this was important to you, too," Nick says.

This is not true, either. What was important to me was Nick. There's a difference.

"I know this wasn't the plan," he murmurs. "But we'll make a new one."

I wrap my arms around his neck and start kissing him. I kiss him so deeply that I start to see stars and he has to hold me up with his arms around my hips. When he pulls away from me, gasping, he stares into the center of me. "Really?" he asks, afraid to hope.

I jump up and wrap my legs around his waist.

Somehow we make it up the stairs, leaving a trail of our clothing behind us. Nick moves in me like a man who's found faith. I touch him, I kiss him, but I am thinking of the flounder. How when they swam to the bottom of the pool, swaying to and fro, it looked like a fall of autumn leaves.

Then Nick buries his face in my neck and I imagine us floating off the bed, more ethereal joined together than we are apart. I picture the faces of angels.

I don't even realize I'm crying until Nick presses a tissue into my hand. "I'm sorry," he says, over and over, like this is a prayer and he

is the sinner.

When I first met Nick, I didn't tell him where I worked. On Saturdays, I became a mermaid at a ratty theme park close to campus. There were four of us at a time, dressed in bikinis and rubber fish tails, submerged in a giant aquarium. We had little tanks of air strapped to our backs, and an air tube we could hold surreptitiously to our mouths when we needed oxygen; we could stay submerged for an hour.

My mermaid alter ego was Marina. I had a blue shell bra and a purple tail. The best outfit was the silver shell bra and the iridescent tail, but that belonged to Audra, who had been a mermaid for seven years. You didn't have to be a certified diver to work there, but I was. The only requirement, I think, was that you had long hair to swirl around, and that you could keep your eyes wide open underwater. What I liked about the job: the looks on the faces of the little girls who truly believed after seeing me that mermaid was a viable career option. What I didn't like about the job: the effect being submerged that long had on my skin. I spent hours with pruny hands and feet.

I had dated Nick for five months and had managed to keep my job a secret from him. It was embarrassing, after all, for a senior

majoring in marine biology to be masquerading as a mythical maritime creature. Instead, I told him I volunteered at a nursing home, thinking he'd never question humanitarian behavior.

Visitors sat on benches in front of the glass tank. Normally we got families and one or two sketchy old guys who just liked to see half-naked women. I could see the daily crowd as we sang our "Sea Sweetheart Welcome Song." (Another talent I could list on a résumé. How many people do you know who can sing underwater without drowning?) One Saturday, I looked out into the audience and counted three families and one creeper. At least I thought it was a creeper, until Nick leaped up, climbed an emergency ladder, dove into the tank fully clothed, and kissed me. He kissed me, and then he put my bubble tube to his mouth, and then he breathed me to life.

I watch Nick in the mirror after his shower. Tiny gold hairs stand up on his forearms.

When the doorbell rings, we are in equal stages of undress. "It's the pizza," I say.

There is a tiny stalemate, where we wait to see who is going to go downstairs to pay for the food we ordered when we were starving after sex.

I lose. I grab money from my wallet in the kitchen, and as I do, I notice that the light is on in the pool, although I am pretty sure I didn't leave it illuminated.

Give me.

I shake my head to clear it. The doorbell rings again.

The kid who is delivering the pizza never even takes his earbuds out. I hand him the twenty and tell him to keep the change. Then I walk back into the kitchen, through the sliding door to the patio near the pool. Its edges are foaming, and the flounder are iridescent. Purple. "Nick," I scream, and he is here in a heartbeat, his bare chest pressed up against my shoulder blades.

"Holy shit," he says.

"I think I heard the pool say something," I mention, my voice tiny.

Nick closes his eyes. "Hope . . ."

"You know what the problem is with you?" I say, turning on him so fiercely that he reels backward. "You want me to tell you the truth. But you don't want to hear it."

I walk away and head back to the bedroom. I'm not hungry anymore. I lie in bed in the dark, staring at the ceiling, until Nick comes in and slips beneath the covers as if nothing has passed between us. "There are only five flounder left," he says.

I would have said, *There are nine missing.*

This, in a nutshell, is my marriage.

The focal point of the aquarium is a three-story cylindrical glass tank that makes up the heart of the building. The rest of the exhibits line the walls in a gradual spiral that leads to the top of the tank; the path down is a ramp that curls its way along the tank all the way down to the penguins, waddling at ground level. The tank is a huge saltwater reef, complete with sand sharks and groupers. Eels creep in the corners. Stingrays shuffle along the tank floor.

I used to love spending time in there. It was my job to do a feeding two or three times a day in front of the public. At 11, 1, and 4, I would get into my wet suit and gear and float at the top of the tank, waiting for Nick to introduce me over the microphone to the visitors who lined the spiral surrounding the tank. Sometimes he called me Annie Aquarium, sometimes I was Sheena, Queen of the Sea. Once, I was Ariel. I was never Hope.

The last thing I would hear as I disappeared below the surface was the even edge of Nick's voice, reeling off facts about marine life. Underwater, language turned violet. The fish were used to me; they knew me by shape. They would swim up to me and bump against my hips and my breasts, trying to get the food cinched in a bag at my waist. Clown fish and blowfish circled my legs. The sharks didn't look me in the eye.

There was a Zen to being underwater, an otherworldly parallel universe I could inhabit. I never could see outside the tank, but I knew children's faces were pressed to the glass, especially when one of those sharks swam by. The kids would draw in a breath as I pulled a whole fish from my pouch and rubbed my free hand over the belly of the shark. It felt cool, hard, and round; the sharks were already sated. We had to keep them that way, or they'd devour all the other fish in the tank.

My favorite place to swim was the base of the tank, because it was dark and full of shadows, shrouded with coral and anemones, full of spiny fish and crustaceans. On the glass wall, I saw my own face and body, mirrored like inside a fun house. When feeding time was over, I would rise like a rocket, out swimming the fastest and strongest fish. I'd burst through the surface of the water and turn, and the first thing I'd see was Nick.

The next morning, there are no more fish.

"What the hell is going on?" Nick says.

The pool is clear and blue, riddled with that red coral reef on the bottom. To look at it, you wouldn't know there was a problem. I walk to the hedge that hides the filter and turn on the underwater light.

“I’m going to lose my job,” Nick says, his voice skating higher. “Do you already know what kind of hoops I had to jump through just to breed flounder off-site? Frank told me that no one would take it seriously enough for publication, but I didn’t listen to him.” Frank is his boss. Frank used to be my boss, too. “And I practically had to prostitute myself to get the funds for—”

“Why?” I ask. “Why did you do it if you knew it wasn’t going to be a publishable study?”

Nick just stares at me in silence.

Because I wasn’t ready to come back to work. So Nick decided to bring the work to me.

A bug zapper hanging from the porch electrocutes a mosquito.

Give me.

“Give you what?” I ask.

Nick stares at me. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Give me,” I repeat. “Didn’t you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

When I was little, I would sit on the beach with my mother, building sand sculptures of blue herons, of giant scorpions. Sometimes she would let me bury her in the sand. From time to time, she’d put her hand on my shoulder. “It’s sad today,” she would say, waving at the Gulf of Mexico. “Can’t you hear it crying?” I never did, but my mother believed so strongly in the communicative power of the water that I grew up believing in the

possibility.

Now, my mother is seventy-five and senile. She can't remember my name, much less the things she believed thirty years ago. But I still wonder what she'd make of this pool.

"I have to get ready for work," Nick says. "Might as well dress for the firing squad."

I watch him go back inside.

"All right," I say, sitting cross-legged on the fieldstone edge of the pool. "I'm listening."

The water gets warmer. I can tell by the way my hair curls around my face.

I need, the pool says.

It sounds like the belly of an echo, like the words are coming from the center of Earth and bubbling up through the drain at the bottom of the pool. It reminds me of singing underwater when I was a mermaid, of how, when Nick proposed in the giant tank, I said, "I love you" and the syllables came out distorted by waves and splashes.

"What do you need?" I ask.

The pool has turned the backyard into an open-air sauna. Steam rises from its surface and rolls over me. There is so much, in fact, it screens the house from view.

Sweets, the pool says.

If my mother could hear this pool, she'd nod. "Oh, yes," she'd say.

“Who doesn’t?”

I fall asleep in the heat and the steam. When I wake up, the coral reef is completely gone. I am not surprised.

When I wrote my senior paper in college, it was on tide pools. They are the little warm water pockets left by receding waves, puddles that hold the heartiest of animals: mussels and snails and horseshoe crabs. Tide-pool creatures have to be tough, because just when they’ve become oriented to their environment, another wave comes and turns the world upside down.

I was thinking of hermit crabs when I looked at the pregnancy test and saw the pink plus sign.

I was thinking that once you add one more to the equation, you can never go back to the sum you used to be.

I was thinking that it was my turn to go to grad school.

I was thinking we’d barely just said I love you.

I was thinking, *Wait.*

I was thinking, *No.*

I never said it out loud, but that doesn’t mean the baby never heard me.

That afternoon, the pool looks ordinary. It's clear and blue and holds sunlight in its corners like tears. If I didn't know better, I'd take a swim.

On my way inside to take a shower, I notice a group of kids gathered near the fence. One, a boy with buckteeth, is straddling another's shoulders so that he can see over the wood slats.

"We've heard things about your pool," he says.

"What things?"

"That it's possessed." He hops off his friend's shoulders and waits for me to open the gate.

"What if I tell you it isn't?" I say.

The boy pulls his baseball cap off his head and tucks it into his back pocket. "Prove it," he answers.

At this point, Nick doesn't believe me. Maybe if these kids hear what I've heard, he will.

We settle on an admission charge of fifty cents. I let the kids—all six of them—file into the backyard. There are four boys and identical twin girls.

"Shit," the tallest boy says. "What a rip-off. It's just a pool."

"Bummer," one girl mutters.

Another kid grabs her arm. "Maybe we should toss Jenna in."

They shout and shuffle, and finally the first boy I spoke with tosses his baseball cap into the center of the pool. It floats, and then bubbles appear at the edges, and then steam rises from the bill. A moment later, it vanishes.

"Did it sink?" Jenna asks, peering over the edge.

"That was sick," another boy says. He looks down at his phone, where he's videoed the evidence. "I'm selling this to TMZ."

"No, wait," I say, but they have already run off.

I lock the gate behind them and go into the house. I call Nick's cell phone. "Please," I say, "come home."

Something in my voice must make him think I'm losing it, because he doesn't even put up a fight. As I hang up, I remember what the pool said last night. I search my cabinets and kitchen drawers for sweets, but all I can find are raisins and an old box of Baci chocolate-covered cherries. I toss the raisins one by one into the center of the pool, but nothing happens. I throw the candy in all at once. The cherries sink faster than the raisins, but all of them are gone before they hit the bottom. A fine, cool mist rises from the surface. It's violet and cerise, goldenrod, indigo. It's the most beautiful rainbow.

I didn't tell Nick for six weeks; I knew the words would change

everything. So instead I pretended I did not have to swallow them down a dozen times a day. I went to work and grocery-shopped and cooked dinner and picked up my dry cleaning and went to bed early, letting his messages go to voice mail. Nick brought me flowers and took me out to dinner, sure that I was giving him the silent treatment for a reason. In reality, I just didn't know what to say.

One day, I was in the penguin enclosure, scrubbing shit off the rocks while the slippery little guys dove and waddled around me in their faux formalwear. I shivered in the water, oblivious to the crowds taking pictures as I worked. Then I heard Frank's voice, asking me to bring 568 to the infirmary. I had no idea what the vets were going to do to that penguin, but then it wasn't my job to ask. It was my job to sort through the constantly moving mass of a hundred penguins and find this needle in the haystack.

"Over there," Frank yelled from dry ground, pointing to one little guy on a rock. He had something tangled around his neck; that was probably the issue.

Penguins, it should be noted, do not stand still.

"Here, buddy," I murmured in a sweet singsong as he flapped his wings at me. "I am absolutely not stalking you right now . . ."

I grabbed him with both hands, tucking him under my arm like a football. That's when I realized that the cord around his neck was a ribbon, and that tied to it was a diamond solitaire ring.

“Marry me?” Nick said. He was suddenly in the penguin enclosure, wearing a wet suit, and there were a hundred people clapping.

“I’m pregnant,” I blurted out.

To his credit, Nick did not skip a beat. “I’ve always hated long engagements,” he said, and he kissed me.

I give a five-dollar bill to a kid who is hanging around, hoping to see the pool, and ask him to get me a package of Hershey’s bars at the Handimart. I want something I can use to show Nick, when he gets home for lunch, that I am not making this up.

The first thing Nick says when he sees the pool is, “What did you do with the reef?” As if I would be able to move a five-hundred-pound hunk of fake coral by myself.

I tell him the pool ate it. That it’s hungry.

Nick unbuttons the collar of his shirt. “Hope,” he says, “do you even hear yourself?”

I throw a chocolate bar into the pool.

Nick tries to catch it before it hits the water, yelling about the level of acidity. But I’ve thrown it too far and the chocolate sinks. We both watch that rainbow glow. “See?” I say.

Nick grips the back of a lounge chair as if he is about to fall

down.

Greens, the pool sighs.

"I'm going to find some vegetables," I say.

"Don't be ridiculous," Nick says. "There's a scientific explanation."

"Really?" I ask. "Like what?"

"Like you're imagining things."

"Did you see fish in this pool yesterday?"

"Yes, but—"

"Are you imagining things, too?"

Well. He comes up short there.

"Hope, I have to go back to work. Just promise me you won't . . . do anything. All right?"

I nod.

But after Nick leaves, I take the station wagon to the supermarket and back up to the loading dock. A teenage clerk tells me I can't park there. "Lady," he says, "what do you think you're doing?"

"I need an awful lot of vegetables, and I was hoping you could load them for me," I say, stepping out of the car.

The boy grins as soon as he sees my face. "Hey! Is this for your pool? My little brother told me he saw your pool eat a baseball cap this morning." He opens the hatch of my station wagon. "Just wait here."

A moment later, he reappears with a big man sporting a greasy comb-over. “No kidding, Owen,” the man says. “This is the chick with the monster pool?” He sizes me up. “You want yesterday’s stuff? I’ll give it to you for half price.”

“Half price? Weren’t you going to just throw it out?”

He winks at me. “You got me, girlie,” he says. “Owen, load her up.”

Peacock flounder are brown, with vibrant blue rings and spots all over. They have a deep *V* between their eyes, as if they’re constantly consumed with thought. They can change color to blend in with the bottom of the sea.

Here is my favorite fact: as peacock-flounder larvae mature, their bodies mellow into circles. Their right eye migrates to the left side of their body through a slit left behind by the separation of the dorsal fin from the cranium.

During this time, they are both asymmetrical and blind.

Once, when I was a mermaid, the air hose cut out during one of my

solo performances. It was a Saturday in February, and the park was packed with tourists. I put the bubbler up to my mouth to breathe in, but there was no air flowing from the oxygen tank. I smiled, tiny bubbles floating from my nostrils. I waved to a little girl who had pink sneakers.

I could have swum to the surface. No one would have thought twice about me aborting the act in the middle, due to a technical malfunction. But instead, I let go of the hose and let it trail behind me while I sank. I curled my tail beneath me and I shrank to the bottom corner of the glass enclosure, my hair a festive cloud around my face.

I held my breath until my lungs were on fire.

Until I couldn't see anything but white.

I imagined myself, as clear as the Florida sky, unfurling in that tank, lying on the sandy bottom, fast asleep. A princess in a glass box.

Instead, Audra—who was on duty next—saw the air hose floating and dove into the tank and yanked me to the surface, pounding on my chest until I spit up all the water I had swallowed.

There are two vans in my driveway. One says Brookville Labs on the side, and the other has a drawing of Jesus. As I park, a nun with a

face as wrinkled as linen steps up and presses her palm to the window. I unroll it. “God bless you, Mrs. Payne,” she says.

She is joined by a striking young priest with green eyes and jet-black hair. I am so busy staring at his dimples that I don’t hear what he’s saying.

“It’s too good to believe,” the nun says.

“I’m sorry?” I say. “What is?”

“God,” the priest replies. “Right here in your backyard. Your neighbor, Margaret LaFoye, saw the face of the Lord reflected in the pool from her bedroom window.” He reaches for my hand. “I’m Father Laborteaux,” he says. “We’re from Saint Margaret’s on Mooney Street. And I have a van full of the Sisters of Mercy, who’d love to pray in your backyard . . .”

A horn sounds from the other van, and a man steps out in white hazmat coveralls. “Not so fast, padre,” he says. He pumps my hand up and down. “Harry Welch. We’ve got reason to believe that your pool is connected to a dump that the hospital had here, before it was a subdivision.”

“Is it toxic?”

He shrugs. “I’ll know after I take some samples.”

It strikes me that all these people have come to see a performance, and that I am not only part of the act but its box office manager. Father Laborteaux even carries a crate of asparagus into the yard for me, and the others follow.

With all the showmanship I once used to submerge myself in the great tank of the aquarium, I hold a bunch of asparagus into the air and, with a flourish, toss it into the center of the pool.

This time when the rainbow appears, everyone claps, and suddenly the pool begins to buzz. A nun faints and has to be carried to the lounge chair. Another strings a medal of Saint Jude on the net we use to fish out leaves and debris.

The pool is in its heyday, humming and fizzing and smoking and steaming. A purple fog rises over the water and trails east by northeast with the wind. In the mist, I see myself and Nick. We are moving in slow motion, dancing an underwater pas de deux, in the mermaid tank.

I shake my head to clear my vision and turn to the priest. His eyes are shining. “My ordination,” he whispers, and crosses himself.

Harry, at the far end of the pool, begins to weep. “That’s my dad,” he says.

I turn to the mist in front of me, waiting. Again, I see Nick, drawing our next breath from the air hose. I feel his arms around me. Even as we rise to the surface, he does not let me go.

I told myself that Nick had proposed before he knew I was

pregnant, so it made sense to get married as quickly as possible. We went to the town hall during one of my lunch breaks. I wore a cream-colored dress that was already tight in the waist.

At Nick's insistence, I stopped diving in the tank and manned the Hands-On Tank, where kids could touch live sea urchins and sea stars.

We called the baby Kumquat.

Sometimes Nick fell asleep with his arms around me, his palms spread across my belly.

Sometimes I woke up and didn't know who I was.

For several hours now, crowds have been lining up outside my fence for admission to the pool. There is a police officer on the block, directing traffic. I've made over $1,000. I've let in people in wheelchairs, blind men, sinners, a pregnant teen, a Vietnam vet. People huddle at the edge, waiting for the purple steam, which pours forth as long as I keep feeding the pool. They wait, hoping they'll get what they came for. At this point, no one with a disability has walked away from their wheelchair and no blind man has seen, but everyone seems to be able to hold on to a dream for a few moments. They leave, pressing my hand, thanking me, different from the way they were when they came.

Every hour, I feed the pool. Admission to that viewing costs twice as much as the others. When the rainbow appears, women sob and grown men sink to their knees.

I am in the midst of a feeding when a TV news crew appears. The reporter, Lou McDaniels, is thin and wiry, with a mustache that has taken the rest of his face hostage. Hearing the cries of surprise as I throw a head of broccoli into the pool, he pushes his way through the gate and stands beside me. “Holy cow,” he murmurs. “I should have brought the underwater cam.”

He sets his crew up on the lawn and asks me about the diet of the pool and how I discovered its insatiability. I hesitate when I begin to tell him about the flounder delivery, then give him all the details. “Lately the pool’s been doing something else,” I say. “I think it shows you what you want to see.”

“Such as?”

“Your dreams,” I say. “Or maybe your past. People who can’t walk see themselves running. Widows see their husbands.” I glance toward the fence, where people are being jostled. “That kind of thing.”

The crowd swells and recedes like a wave, then pushes one man forward. Lou McDaniels asks me a question, but I can’t focus; I’m too busy watching Nick approach.

“Hope?” the reporter prompts. “What did *you* see?”

Nick stops three feet away from the videographer.

“The first time I fell in love,” I say.

Nick grabs my wrist and pulls me away. “What are these people doing in our yard?” he says.

“I can’t help it if they’re interested.” We stare at each other, waiting for the other to break. There’s something empty in Nick’s eyes. I wonder if it’s him, or just a reflection of me.

“You think they’ll still be interested when they realize you just got out of a psychiatric hospital?”

His words feel like a slap. *Are* you*?* I want to ask. *Are* you *still interested?*

“They’re not doing any damage,” I say stiffly.

Nick rubs a hand down his face. “I’m not worried about them, Hope. I’m worried about you. I didn’t mean—”

“You did,” I say softly.

But before he can respond, we hear a moan. It belches from the ground and rises to the sky. *More.*

Lou McDaniels’s jaw drops, and he pulls the videographer’s shirt. “Tell me you got that,” he says.

Leaving Nick, I run to the edge of the pool and see that a thick green gel has formed a ring around the water’s edge. With strength I didn’t know I had, I pick up a crate of Boston lettuce and hurl it over my head, so that each green head flies like a grenade and splashes.

Nick is beside me when the mist begins to rise over the pool.

“What do you see?” I ask, facing him. Desperate.

There we are, under the water, still turning in slow motion. Kissing behind a screen of bubbles.

“I don’t see a thing,” Nick mutters, and he walks away.

During our first weeks as newlyweds, Nick would seek me out at the aquarium near the Hands-On Tank, his eyes bright with his plans for his flounder study. As I tried to keep little monsters from ripping off the legs of sea stars, Nick would go on and on about flounder territories. He’d ask me for my feedback on his proposed hypothesis. We were, I thought, still part of a team.

One day, I got an acceptance letter from the University of Hawaii’s MS program in marine biology. I ran to his tiny office to share the news. “Hawaii!” I said. “Can you imagine?”

“That’s great . . . ,” Nick said.

“But?”

He looked at me. “Hope,” he said, “you can’t go to Hawaii.”

I would be six months pregnant by then.

I tried to pretend that I had, of course, considered this. “I mean, I know that. I’ll defer a year,” I said, shrugging this off, when both of us knew that I probably couldn’t move to Hawaii if Nick was employed here in Boston, and if there was a baby in our lives.

I needed to lose myself that day. So I went into the locker room and put on my wet suit. I loaded up my waist pack with fish. I climbed onto the metal railing at the top of the giant tank, where another aquarist named Lesley was getting ready to do the 1 p.m. feeding I used to do. “Oh, Frank needs to see you,” I lied. “He asked me to cover.”

By now, it was well-known among the staff that I was pregnant —that penguin proposal had morphed to mythic proportions. Lesley looked at my abdomen. “Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Five minutes can’t hurt,” I said, and I sank below the surface.

There, I swam around the mirrored walls of the glass tank and stared into the lazy eyes of sea turtles. I rubbed the hard bellies of the sharks and ignored the flutter in my own.

There, at great cost, I remembered who I used to be.

This is what I’ve fed the pool:

Fifty pounds of asparagus. Fifty pounds of lettuce. Twenty-five pounds of broccoli. Green beans, leftover Chinese food, chocolate. Jelly beans, Jujubes, tofu, couscous. Campbell’s soup, still in the can. Tortillas and frozen french fries. Yogurt gone bad and yogurt that’s still fresh. Salt-free potato chips. Seven gallons of milk.

It is now almost midnight, and the pool is still hungry. It asks for

food at regular fifteen-minute intervals. Although the throngs of people have dissipated, there is still a small group of people maintaining a vigil. They carry flashlights and line the fieldstone with citronella candles.

I watch from the kitchen as people rub good-luck charms and count rosary beads. They wrap up in blankets and lie under the stars. Every so often I take a cardboard box that once held broccoli and empty a cabinet in the kitchen. At this point, there are only eggs and bottled water left in the fridge.

Nick and I aren't speaking. He sits at the kitchen table, his fingers pressed to his temples. He has been sitting like that for four hours. I am plucking bottles from the spice rack: chives, parsley, mustard seed. The bottles clink as they roll against each other in the box.

Then Nick gets up, as if he has come to a decision. He walks into the backyard. He stands on the diving board and clears his throat like he's about to deliver the Ten Commandments. "I'm sorry, but you all have to go home," he says. "This is my backyard and my pool, and I want to keep it that way."

As he is talking, the ground shakes. The pool turns neon yellow.

I show everyone the way out. I lock the gate and find Nick waiting for me on the back porch. "Hope," he says, his voice breaking, "I'm going to call Dr. Fisher."

White coat, red lipstick, black bob. The scratch of her pencil.

Three bitter pills in a paper cup. The group sessions, where sometimes all I could do was sob.

"No," I say, shivering. "I can't go back there."

Nick puts his hands into his pockets. "Neither can I," he says sadly. He walks back into the house. I see his silhouette as he holds the phone to his ear.

Here is what I never told anyone. Not Nick, not my OB. Not Dr. Fisher. Not the paramedics who found me in the bathtub, slack with sleeping pills, beneath the surface of the water.

I heard her speak to me before she left.

She said, *It's my turn.*

We've barely just said I love you, I told her.

She said, *Wait.*

She said, *No.*

The fact that she didn't say this out loud doesn't mean I never heard it.

The pool churns like the spin cycle of the washing machine. Waves

splash on my ankles. “What?” I whisper. “What now?”

You.

It is the color of the Caribbean. In the shallows, I can suddenly spot porpoises, parrot fish, Portuguese men-of-war. Bright brain coral sets the deep end on fire.

It’s been a long time since I had a swim.

Without thinking about what I’m doing, I stand and peel off my clothes. I walk the diving board like a plank.

The moment my hands break the surface of the water, mist rises, and there she is. Perfect and tiny, the size of a kumquat. Her skin the pink inside of a seashell. Her arms crossed. Her heartbeat a rebel drum, not that terrible hurricane of silence underneath the ultrasound wand.

Sometimes these things just happen.

There’s no scientific explanation.

But I knew it was my fault. I knew even as I swam with the sharks that day, as fish slipped over my feet and ankles, that I could not stay afloat.

I think of the air tube rising to the surface of the mermaid tank. And I sink.

Then a hand cuts through the velvet underground and wraps around my wrist. Nick drags me out of the pool, into the heaviness of here. He is dripping over me. “God,” he whispers. “I’m sorry.”

They come the next day with their pumps and their bulldozers, with truckloads of fill. They suck the water from the pool and crack the gunite, taking it away in giant pieces. A reverse puzzle.

Nick and I sit with our shoulders touching, watching as soil is dumped into the hole left by the pool. He has not let me out of his sight. He drove me to Dr. Fisher's office, and back. He cried with me when I told him the truth. I cannot help but think that this landscaping is a burial. I'm just not sure what is in the grave.

When the pit is level, Nick walks to the edge. "We'll get grass seed," he says. "Or wildflowers."

He steps onto the diving board, which remains like a scar, a visual oxymoron. After a few bounces, Nick leaps into the dirt. His bare feet leave an impression. Then he holds out his hand. "Come in for a dip?" he says, an invitation.

I walk over what used to be water. I wonder how long it will take for things to grow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo © 2017 Deborah Feingold

Jodi Picoult is the #1 bestselling author of twenty-four novels, including *Songs of the Humpback Whale* (1992), *My Sister's Keeper* (2004), *Nineteen Minutes* (2007), *Sing You Home* (2011), *Lone Wolf* (2012), *The Storyteller* (2013), and *Leaving Time* (2014), and two young adult novels, *Between the Lines* (2012) and *Off the Page* (2014), which were cowritten with her daughter, Samantha van Leer. Her most recent novel, *Small Great Things*, published in October 2016, was an instant #1 *New York Times* bestseller. Her books have been translated into thirty-four languages in thirty-five countries. Four novels—*The Pact*, *Plain Truth*, *The Tenth Circle*, and *Salem Falls*—have been made into television movies. *My Sister's Keeper* was a big-screen release from New Line Cinema, with Nick Cassavetes directing and Cameron Diaz starring. *Small Great Things*

has been optioned for motion-picture adaptation by Amblin Entertainment and is set to star Viola Davis and Julia Roberts. Picoult is also currently developing a Broadway musical based on her YA novels. She is the recipient of many awards, including a New England Book Award, an Alex Award from the Young Adult Library Services Association, a lifetime achievement award for mainstream fiction from the Romance Writers of America, and a New Hampshire Literary Award. She holds honorary doctorates from Dartmouth College and the University of New Haven. She is also a member of the advisory board for VIDA: Women in Literary Arts. Picoult lives in New Hampshire with her husband. They have three children.

ALSO BY JODI PICOULT

Small Great Things

Leaving Time

The Storyteller

Lone Wolf

Sing You Home

House Rules

Handle with Care

Change of Heart

Nineteen Minutes

The Tenth Circle

Vanishing Acts

My Sister's Keeper

Second Glance

Perfect Match

Salem Falls

Plain Truth

Keeping Faith

The Pact

Mercy

Picture Perfect

Harvesting the Heart

Songs of the Humpback Whale

For YA

Between the Lines

Off the Page

And for the Stage

Over the Moon: An Original Musical for Teens

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2017 by Jodi Picoult
All rights reserved.

Cover design: Belief Agency

Videography and photography by Belief Agency, except where noted.

Coral Composite Image: 521982632, 521975706, 505139122/jon841/iStock by Getty Images

Tide pool: 473052353/milehightraveler/Creatas Video/Getty Images

Filled-in Pool Composite Image: 591495464/Supergear Studio/Shutterstock; 400465597/Phototalker/Shutterstock; 133956314/diogoppr/Shutterstock; 428746984/Art_man/Shutterstock

CAST AND CREW

Hope: Virginia Hankins

Production by Belief Agency

Director: Jesse Bryan

Producers: Jonathan Dunn and David Schultz

Director of Photography: Andy Maier

Camera Operators: David Faddis and Ryan Ford

Underwater Camera Operator: David McDonald

Post Production and VFX: Andy Maier

Layout Art Director: Ryan Clark

Layout Design and Art: Matthew Naylor

Special thanks to the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach, California.